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SUBJECT: PRT SALAH AD DIN: TUZ ELECTIONS OVERVIEW

Classified By: PRT Leader Rick Bell for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Salah ad Din reporting cable.

¶2. (C) Summary: Tuz Khormatu district in Salah ad Din (SaD) province has an ethnically mixed population made up of Kurds, Turcomans (both Sunni and Shi'a) and Sunni Arabs. While the district is unavoidably linked to the controversy over neighboring Kirkuk, relations between ethnic and confessional groups remain relatively calm. Furthermore, unlike Kirkuk, Tuz will participate in the upcoming Provincial Council (PC) elections. Given the expected high province-wide turnout of Sunni voters, coupled with a fractured local electoral base, Tuz will be hard pressed to retain its current over-representation on the Provincial Council. While lingering security concerns remain, the local parties have good relations with one another, and the electoral process appears to be on track to be accepted by the district's population as legitimate and credible. USG and UNAMI support of the electoral process has been and continues to be an important factor in that acceptance. That support is especially helpful in mitigating Turcoman distrust of the Kurds. End Summary.

TUZ: A MICROCOSM

¶3. (SBU) Many PRT Tuz contacts have described Tuz as a miniature Iraq, because of the unique ethnic mix of its population. Best estimates put the Kurdish population at roughly one quarter of the district, with the balance evenly divided between Turcomans and Sunni Arabs. There are probably more Shi'a than Sunni Turcomans, although the exact proportion is unclear.

¶4. (C) Tuz's complicated political scene reflects its ethnic and religious diversity. There are no fewer than six major lists competing for Turcoman votes (in part because many Shi'a Turcomans vote their religious identity rather than their ethnicity): Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Rule of Law Coalition List, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq's List of the Martyr of the Pulpit and the Independent Force, Ibrahim Ja'afari's National Reform Trend, and the one-man list of Provincial Health DG Dr. Hassan Zayn-al-Abidin Naqi. The Sadr Trend is not running in the elections, but one of its Council of Representatives (CoR) members, Fawzi Akram Samin Tarzi, is from Tuz. The Kurdish-dominated Brotherhood and Peaceful Coexistence list makes a good show of ethnic diversity in both its name and its disciplined rhetoric, but will probably overwhelmingly attract Kurdish votes; it includes both main Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK. Among Sunni Arabs, a wide variety of options exist, with perhaps Tawafuq in the strongest position.

ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL

¶5. (C) While Tuz's long-term stability is tied to the fate of Kirkuk, its politics reflects its own peculiar circumstances.

With the notable exception of the Iraqi Turcoman Front (ITF), whose marked antipathy towards the PUK and KDP is returned in kind, the parties in Tuz seem to have genuinely friendly relations with one another. There have been few specific accusations of fraud or violence among the major parties. The head of the KDP Assayish, Qahtan Taher Qader (Strictly Protect), has asserted that insurgents are attempting to pressure Sunni Arabs outside the city to vote for the Tawafuq/Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) list, but he did not seem overly concerned. There have been expressions of general concern about fraud, but no specific charges have yet been made. PRT Tuz has observed that party leaders have been extremely receptive to UN monitoring.

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¶6. (S) Insurgent activity remains a real problem, however. On January 17, unknown individuals placed a sophisticated magnetic IED on the door of the house of Ameen Aziz, a well-respected Kurd and the Number 1 candidate on the Kurdish-dominated Brotherhood list. PRT Tuz deems JAM Special Groups as the most likely culprit, given both the sophisticated nature of the IED and the degraded state of Sunni insurgent groups in Tuz. The attack raises the risk that the Kurds might over react and that their Assayish security forces might engage in provocative acts before the elections. The Tuz PRT and CF are closely monitoring the situation. According to the Tuz IHEC Director, no qualified teachers or lawyers in Sulayman Beg volunteered to serve as poll workers, a reflection of lingering fear of insurgent activity in the district. Leaders of the major parties have all expressed concerns to the PRT that insurgent activity may disrupt the election. Despite these concerns, Tuz remains a relatively secure district and threat levels should not be

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overstated. CF commanders have been satisfied with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) security arrangements to date.

MOLLIFYING THE LOSERS

¶7. (C) Tuz stands to lose its current over-representation on the Provincial Council (13 of 41 seats) if Sunni Arabs throughout the province turn out to vote in large numbers as expected. (Note: Most Sunni Arabs boycotted the last election, resulting in an overall turnout of only 28 percent.

End Note.) Because the entire province is one electoral constituency, the geographical remoteness of Tuz and the differences of its ethnic mix will make it harder for Tuz candidates to build province-wide support. The Tuz PRT believes that the (Kurdish-led) Brotherhood list's ability to command the unified support of the district's Kurdish population will allow it to capture at least one PC seat, but the various parties vying for Turcoman and Sunni Arab votes will be harmed by the large number of lists competing for non-Kurdish vote.

¶8. (C) The Turcomans as a whole may be especially unsatisfied with the electoral results. The ITF will be hamstrung by competition from the Shi'a parties, and due to their limited appeal outside of Tuz, it will be difficult for them to win even a single seat on the PC. The head of the ITF in Tuz, Ali Hashem, has complained to the Tuz PRT of purported voting irregularities (including Assayish and Iraqi Police intimidation) that favored the Kurds in the 2005 elections, and he has already expressed concerns about possible problems in the upcoming voting. When the Tuz PRT cited the increased professionalism of the ISF (including a Turcoman Tuz Police Chief, who recently replaced a Kurd), and the planned presence of UN observers as two ways such concerns would be addressed, Hashem seemed receptive, but post-election disappointments seem unavoidable.

¶9. (SBU) The Turcomans, especially those who back the ITF, are more notably anti-Kurd than the Kurds' other rivals.

However, for those Shi'a Turcomans who see themselves as Shi'a first-and-foremost, connections to the Shi'a-majority GOI in Baghdad will assuage any potential disappointment if the Kurds win a disproportionate number of PC seats. Among the Sunni Arabs from Tuz, the prospect of a legitimate Sunni Arab-majority Provincial Council will soften the blow if none of their Tuz-based candidates wins a seat. Most importantly, however, unless there are substantial irregularities in the election, the generally positive relations among the different parties should help even the losers accept the election results.

¶10. (C) This relative partisan harmony reflects reasonably calm relations among the different ethnic and sectarian groups in Tuz -- indeed, when denouncing Iranian influence in Tuz, Qader (the Kurdish KDP Assayish commander) sounds like a genuine Iraqi nationalist. Much of his anti-ITF rhetoric was phrased in the idiom of denouncing foreign influence -- in the case of the ITF, Turkey. The PUK-affiliated qaimmaqam (mayor), Mohammad Rashid, has told the Tuz PRT twice that he hopes CF will remain in Tuz for the long term, because they can help prevent Tuz from being drawn into a larger conflict between the GOI and the KRG that local residents in Tuz want no part of. Even Abdul Hussein Jalad (Strictly Protect), the director of relations at the Tuz office of the ostensibly anti-SOFA National Reform Trend, described CF as an honest broker among the different ethnic and sectarian groups in Tuz. In his view, the various groups in Tuz would have good relations with one another if it were not for parties at the national level stoking tensions for their own partisan advantage. The Sunni Turcoman political base of the ITF gets along less well with other parties, however.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Despite its place in the orbit of Kirkuk, Tuz remains reasonably calm at the moment. Disappointment among ITF loyalists may be the most likely destabilizing factor in Tuz. Continued engagement with political leaders, coordination with IHEC and ISF to ensure that the elections run as smoothly as possible, and support of the UNAMI observer mission, should all help mitigate negative reactions. End Comment.
CROCKER